

## Agricultural Workers

(0\*NET 45-2011.00, 45-2041.00, 45-2091.00, 45-2092.01, 45-2092.02, 45-2093.00, and 45-2099.99)

### Significant Points

- Duties and working conditions vary widely, from working in greenhouses, to producing crops and raising livestock outdoors, to inspecting agricultural products in plants.
- Most workers learn through short-term on-the-job training; agricultural inspectors need work experience or a college degree in a related field.
- Most farmworkers receive low pay and often must perform strenuous work outdoors in all kinds of weather, but many prefer to work and live in a rural area.
- Employment is projected to grow more slowly than average.

### Nature of the Work

Agricultural workers play a large role in getting food, plants, and other agricultural products to market. Working mostly on farms or ranches or in nurseries, slaughterhouses, or ports of entry, these workers have numerous and diverse duties. Among their activities are planting and harvesting crops, installing irrigation, delivering animals, and making sure that our food is safe.

More than 4 out of 5 agricultural workers are farmworkers and laborers. *Farmworkers and laborers, crop, nursery, and greenhouse* perform numerous activities related to growing and harvesting grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts, fiber, trees, shrubs, and other crops. Among their activities are planting and seeding, pruning, irrigating, harvesting, and packing and loading crops for shipment. Farmworkers also apply pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers to crops; repair fences; and help with irrigation. Nursery and greenhouse workers prepare land or greenhouse beds for growing horticultural products, such as trees, plants, flowers, and sod. Their duties include planting, watering, pruning, weeding, and spraying the plants. They may cut, roll, and stack sod; stake trees; tie, wrap, and pack plants to fill orders; and dig up or move field-grown and containerized shrubs and trees.

*Farmworkers, farm and ranch animals* care for live farm, ranch, or aquacultural animals that may include cattle, sheep, swine, goats, horses, poultry, finfish, shellfish, and bees. The animals are usually raised to supply such products as meat, fur, skins, feathers, eggs, milk, and honey. The farmworkers' duties may include feeding, watering, herding, grazing, castrating, branding, debeaking, weighing, catching, and loading animals. On dairy farms, farmworkers operate milking machines; they also may maintain records on animals, examine animals to detect diseases and injuries, assist in delivering animals at their birth, and administer medications, vaccinations, or insecticides as appropriate. Daily duties of such farmworkers include cleaning and maintaining animal housing areas.

Other farmworkers known as *agricultural equipment operators* operate a variety of farm equipment used in plowing, sowing, maintaining, and harvesting agricultural products. The equipment may include tractors, fertilizer spreaders, haybines, raking equipment, balers, combines, and threshers, as well as trucks. These farmworkers also operate machines used in moving and treating crops after their harvest, such as conveyor belts, loading machines, separators, clean-

ers, and dryers. In addition, they may make adjustments and minor repairs to equipment. When not operating machines, agricultural equipment operators may perform other farm duties that are not typical of other farmworkers.

*Agricultural inspectors*, another type of agricultural worker, are employed by Federal and State governments to ensure compliance with laws and regulations governing the health, quality, and safety of agricultural commodities. Inspectors also make sure that the facilities and equipment used in processing the commodities meet quality standards. Meat safety is one of their prime responsibilities, and they try to ensure that the meat we eat is free of harmful ingredients or bacteria. In meat-processing facilities, inspectors may collect samples of suspected diseased animals or materials and send the samples to a laboratory for identification and analysis. They also may inspect livestock to help determine the effectiveness of medication and feeding programs. Some inspectors are stationed at export and import sites to weigh and inspect agricultural shipments leaving and entering the country, to ensure the quality and quantity of the shipments. A few work at logging sites, making sure that safety regulations are enforced.

*Graders and sorters* of agricultural products examine agricultural commodities being prepared to be packed for market and classify them according to quality or size guidelines. They grade, sort, or classify unprocessed food and other agricultural products by size, weight, color, or condition and discard inferior or defective products. For example, graders sort eggs by color and size and also examine the fat content, or marbling, of beef, assigning a grade of "Prime," "Choice," or something else, as appropriate. The grade that is assigned determines the price at which the commodity may be sold.

### Working Conditions

Working conditions for agricultural workers vary widely. Much of the work of farmworkers and laborers on farms and ranches takes place outdoors in all kinds of weather and is physical in nature. Harvesting fruits and vegetables, for example, may require much bending, stooping, and lifting. Workers may lack adequate sanitation facilities while working in the field, and their drinking water may be limited. The year-round nature of much livestock production work means that ranch workers must be out in the heat of summer, as well as the cold of winter. While some of these workers enjoy the day-to-day variability of the work, the rural setting, working on the land, and raising animals, the work hours are generally uneven and often long; work cannot be delayed when crops must be



Many agricultural workers work in nurseries and greenhouses.

planted and harvested or when animals must be sheltered and fed. Weekend work is common, and farmworkers may work a 6- or 7-day week during planting and harvesting seasons. Because much of the work is seasonal in nature, many workers also obtain other jobs during slow seasons. Migrant farmworkers, who move from location to location as crops ripen, live an unsettled lifestyle, which can be stressful.

Work also is seasonal for farmworkers in nurseries; spring and summer are the busiest times of the year. Greenhouse workers enjoy relatively comfortable working conditions while tending to plants indoors. However, during the busy seasons, when landscape contractors need plants, work schedules may be more demanding, requiring weekend work. Moreover, the transition from warm weather to cold weather means that nursery workers might have to work overtime with little notice given, in order to move plants indoors in case of a frost.

Federal meat inspectors may work in highly mechanized plants or with poultry or livestock in confined areas with extremely cold temperatures and slippery floors. The duties often require working with sharp knives, moderate lifting, and walking or standing for long periods. Many inspectors work long and often irregular hours. Inspectors may find themselves in adversarial roles when the organization or individual being inspected objects to the inspection or its potential consequences. Some inspectors travel frequently to visit farms and processing facilities. Others work at ports, inspecting cargo on the docks or on boats.

Graders and sorters may work with similar products for an entire shift, or they may be assigned a variety of items. They may be on their feet all day and may have to lift heavy objects, whereas others may sit during most of their shift and do little strenuous work. Some graders work in clean, air-conditioned environments, suitable for carrying out controlled tests. Some may work evenings or weekends because of the perishable nature of the products. Overtime may be required to meet production goals.

Farmworkers in crop production risk exposure to pesticides and other hazardous chemicals sprayed on crops or plants. However, exposure is relatively minimal if safety procedures are followed. Those who work on mechanized farms must take precautions to avoid injury when working with tools and heavy equipment. Those who work directly with animals risk being bitten or kicked.

## Employment

Agricultural workers held about 795,000 jobs in 2002. Of these, farmworkers were the most numerous, holding 670,000 jobs. Graders and sorters held 49,000 jobs, agricultural inspectors 16,000 jobs, and agricultural equipment operators 61,000 jobs. Approximately 69 percent of all agricultural workers worked for crop and livestock producers, while almost 5 percent worked for agricultural service providers, mostly farm labor contractors.

## Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Farmworkers learn through short-term on-the-job training. Most do not have a high school diploma. The preponderance of workers without a high school diploma is particularly high in the crop production sector, where there are more labor-intensive establishments employing migrant farmworkers.

In nurseries, entry-level workers must be able to follow directions and learn proper planting procedures. If driving is an essential part of a job, employers look for applicants with a good driving record and some experience driving a truck. Workers who deal directly with customers must get along well with people. Employers also look for responsible, self-motivated individuals, because nursery workers sometimes work with little supervision.

For graders and sorters, training requirements vary on the basis of their responsibilities. For those who perform tests on various agricultural products, a high school diploma is preferred and may be required. Simple jobs requiring mostly visual inspection may be filled by beginners provided with short-term on-the-job training.

Becoming an agricultural inspector requires relevant work experience or some college course work in a field such as biology or agricultural science. Inspectors are trained in the applicable laws or inspection procedures through some combination of classroom and on-the-job training. In general, people who want to enter this occupation should be responsible, like detailed work, and be able to communicate well. Federal Government inspectors whose job performance is satisfactory advance through a career ladder to a specified full-performance level. For positions above this level—usually supervisory positions—advancement is competitive and based on agency needs and individual merit. Advancement opportunities in State and local governments and in the private sector often are similar to those in the Federal Government.

Advancement of agricultural workers depends on motivation and experience. Farmworkers who work hard and quickly, have good communication skills, and take an interest in the business may advance to crew leader or other supervisory positions. Some agricultural workers may aspire to become farm, ranch, and other agricultural managers, or farmers or ranchers themselves. (Farmers, ranchers, and agricultural managers are discussed elsewhere in the *Handbook*.) In addition, their knowledge of raising and harvesting produce may provide an excellent background for becoming purchasing agents and buyers of farm products. Knowledge of working a farm as a business can help agricultural workers become farm and home management advisors. Those who earn a college degree in agricultural science could become agricultural and food scientists.

## Job Outlook

Overall employment of agricultural workers is projected to grow more slowly than the average for all occupations over the 2002-12 period, primarily reflecting the outlook for farmworkers, who make up the large majority of all agricultural workers. Low wages, the physical demands of the work, and high job turnover should result in abundant job opportunities, however.

Continued consolidation of farms and technological advancements in farm equipment will dampen employment growth. Nevertheless, those farms remaining in operation will still need workers to help with their operations, and farm labor contractors' employment of farmworkers is expected to increase steadily. Nursery and greenhouse workers should have the most rapid job growth, reflecting the increasing demand for landscaping services.

Slower-than-average employment growth also is anticipated for agricultural inspectors. Governments at all levels are not expected to hire significant numbers of new inspectors, choosing to leave more of the routine inspection to businesses. Slower-than-average growth also is expected for graders and sorters, and agricultural equipment operators, reflecting the agriculture industry's continuing ability to produce more with fewer workers.

## Earnings

Median hourly earnings of the more numerous farmworkers in crops, nurseries, and greenhouses were \$7.24 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$6.85 and \$8.37 an hour, while the lowest 10 percent earned less than \$6.24 and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$10.32.

Median hourly earnings for farmworkers who work with livestock were \$8.22. The middle 50 percent earned between \$6.98 and

\$10.32 an hour, while the lowest 10 percent earned less than \$6.27 and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$13.01.

Median hourly earnings of graders and sorters of agricultural products were \$7.67 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$6.88 and \$9.30. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$6.22, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$11.80.

Median hourly earnings of agricultural inspectors were \$13.76 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$10.44 and \$18.79. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$9.10, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$23.94.

Median hourly earnings for agricultural equipment operators in 2002 were \$8.31. The middle 50 percent earned between \$6.96 and \$10.78. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$6.11, the highest 10 percent more than \$13.89.

Few agricultural workers are members of unions.

### **Related Occupations**

The duties of farmworkers who perform outdoor labor are related to the work of fishers and operators of fishing vessels; forest, conservation, and logging workers; and grounds maintenance workers. Farmworkers who work with farm and ranch animals perform work related to that of animal care and service workers.

### **Sources of Additional Information**

Information on agricultural worker jobs is available from

► National FFA Organization, The National FFA Center, Career Information Requests, P.O. Box 68690, Indianapolis, IN, 46268-0960. Internet: <http://www.ffa.org>

Information on farmworker jobs is available from

► The New England Small Farm Institute, 275 Jackson St., Belchertown, MA 01007. Internet: <http://www.smallfarm.org/newoof/newoof.html>

Information on obtaining a position as an agricultural inspector with the Federal Government is available from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) through a telephone-based system. Consult your telephone directory under "U.S. Government" for a local number, or call (703) 724-1850; Federal Relay Service: (800) 877-8339. The first number is not toll free, and charges may result. Information also is available from the OPM Internet site: <http://www.usajobs.opm.gov>